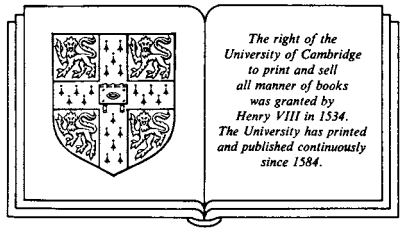
Occupation and Society

The East Anglian Fishermen 1880–1914

TREVOR LUMMIS



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Introduction

If social thinkers also possess a sense of *history*,... they know that any pattern of sociostructural relations is actually ongoing transformations and that the real object of sociological thinking is not only 'sociostructures' but also *their historical movement*.

Daniel Bertaux 1981

This book attempts to explain the development of the economic structure of a particular occupational group and to understand the relation of this to individual and collective values and behaviour. It has drawn on the historian's usual range of written sources but the understanding of those sources was greatly enriched by the intervention of another source of evidence, that of life history interviews with people who experienced this particular place, occupation and time.[1] Anyone who has worked with a number of interviews will appreciate just how much the informant's insights contribute to the final analysis. That is not written to avoid responsibility for the interpretation which follows but to acknowledge a debt and to make a methodological point:

The historian should start with the actor's interpretation of his situation, his actions in that situation, and the consequences of those actions for his interpretation in the future. Superimposed on this model, however, is that of the historical observer, who can see both the actor's 'real' situation (not necessarily coincident with the actor's interpretation of his situation) and the intended and unintended consequences of action in that situation.[2]

My informants' accounts of their situation revealed the importance of historical experience in their response to contemporary 'real' situations. The participant's memories were not an inert archive of what had happened but a web of sequential experience which influenced contemporary activity. I started this study with the assumption that occupational identity would determine social being, and this remains the fundamental thrust of the argument, but I have been convinced that the material conditions of the industry cannot account for industrial and

social attitudes to the degree that I had assumed. Fishing was an intensely competitive occupation and economic individualism a central value of the workforce so it was not a very convincing location for their community practices and values. Perhaps occupational history and sociology has too often been written as if individuals, particularly males, enter the workforce *table rasa* to be moulded by their occupation, or from the assumption that the link between occupation and communal values is unproblematic.

A family's class position may depend on the father's occupation in most cases but it is equally evident that individuals' first experience and knowledge of class comes long before they enter the workforce. It is absorbed in domestic life, at school and in the way other people treat them and their parents: also the way in which their parents react to others. In other words our first *class* experiences are largely mediated through domestic life, our mothers and local community, however much they may be determined by occupation, our fathers and wider class divisions. The values and expectations formed during this pre-work experience are the basis upon which subsequent experience is evaluated.

The problematic nature of the link between occupation and community and class practice is connected to the separation of home and work. It is not self-evident how the solidarity values of the workplace, whether it be coalface, shopfloor or ship's deck, are transferred back into the domestic and residential community. It is, after all, the female network of mutual aid which sustains a community and the individual female network of aid does not necessarily reflect the male network of the particular gang or shift. Certain work situations promote sectionalism and intra-class conflicts, or, as with the fishermen studied here, individualism, and do not provide the appropriate values for a unified community. But, whatever the divisions at the workplace, the experience of the families living on a given income in a particular milieu is a class experience: it is a direct experience of women and children and nowhere is this more apparent than in this occupation where men were away from home so much of their time.

Behaviour is shaped by memories of the past, as well as by present social forces; the importance of both is responsible for the scope of this text. The contents of its three parts are outlined below.

Part one divides the fishermen into three sections: inshore, trawling and drifting.[3] Each section had a distinctive capital structure, degree of crew autonomy, level of earnings and so forth; each experienced the peak of prosperity, technical and commercial changes at different

points in time. This variation in the timing and causes of potential and actual conflicts provides the advantages of comparative analysis while being contained within a common socio-economic, cultural and historical framework. As fishermen tended to work exclusively in one or other of the sections they are 'real' categories and ones which include social and family life through the very different pattern of interaction permitted by the work pattern in each case. Nevertheless, the study is not entirely self-referring and draws on studies of the Humber trawling industry (Tunstall 1962), of the Scottish drifter industry, which developed parallel to the East Anglian one (Gray 1978), and of Scandinavia (Wadel 1972), where the modern herring industry demonstrates similar industrial and social practices from a similar mode of production.

The drifting and trawling sectors experienced the greatest technical change and capital investment and, therefore, the greatest potential for industrial and social dynamic. They are the main focus of the study.

The timing of strikes and points of conflict within these two sections highlight relations of production as the major element in shaping industrial attitudes. The drifting section had a record of strikes during the 1850s and 1860s prior to the introduction of new technology but none later. The early record in trawling is obscure but 1887 saw a major strike accompanied by the formation of a union and that was a direct result of the employers' decision to change the method of payment. After this early conflict and unionisation of previously unorganised workers (which anticipated the great upswing in other industries and areas by two years) industrial conflict and militancy virtually disappear. Although the union survived in the region until the turn of the century there was no response to the 1901 Grimsby strike/lockout nor to the unrest between 1911 and 1914 which saw the formation of unions in the drifter section in Scotland. Trade unions sent organisers to Yarmouth and Lowestoft in 1904 and again in 1911 but the response of the fishermen was minimal. The phenomenon to be explained, then, is the decline of conflict.

The detailed analysis is strengthened through the comparison of the markedly different economic development in the two sections and of different methods of rewards within sections. Trawling did not adopt steam propulsion and modern nets and became less profitable and increasingly anachronistic as existing capital was worked out. By contrast, in the drifting section technical change increased productivity by some 200 per cent in a decade, much of it requiring a similar increase in the intensity of labour: a situation where industrial conflict might have been anticipated. From the employers' point of view their

capital costs increased some threefold and yet the proportion of the product going to labour remained constant, which raises the question if labour was acquiescent, why did the employers not try to change the wage bargain to compensate for their higher capital input? Or, to put the issue another way, how did labour with no formal organisations manage to maintain its share of the increased productivity?

Part one, then, is concerned with a detailed examination of the economic structure of the industry and the record of industrial conflict. It is also essential to establish the industrial context in detail as a basis for Parts two and three. The pattern of work and of income level place obvious constrictions on the pattern of relations with families and community ashore as well as determining their social location.

Part two considers the social structure of the fishermen through the concept of community, the distribution of ownership within the industry and its links with local commerce as well as the social and political perceptions of the fishermen themselves. Fishermen are central to the debate on community in so far as they have been considered to be the epitome of two different concepts of community, the first of which was destroyed by the second. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century observers (Jenkins 1920, Johnstone 1905) considered that the traditional forms of fishing, namely the inshore and drifting sections, produced communities which the development of steam trawling and the subsequent concentration of ownership and centralisation into large ports was destroying. Later sociological studies (Tunstall 1962, Horobin 1957), however, identify trawling as a fully developed occupational community. This contradiction is partially explained in terms of the historical formation of new communities but there has also been a shift of emphasis from social to occupational factors in the concept of community.

As with the earlier examination of the fishermen's industrial consciousness their perceptions on community, social structure and relations are integrated with the economic reality of their position. For this reason the detailed analysis of ownership within the industry and the sources of capital which might well have been presented earlier has been reserved for this section. In categorising and analysing class images particular care has been placed in trying to establish the real boundaries of the diverse terms used by informants to stratify their social experience. The result of this categorisation is then related to the typification of traditional workers (Lockwood 1966), images of class (Bulmer 1975) and occupational community (Allcorn and Marsh 1975). One of the more suggestive results of this approach is the

implication that perception of the shape of the class structure may be more germane to conflictual views of class than the number of classes perceived. One advantage of the life history evidence is that it reveals how the shift from agricultural work to fishing released the men from the social control exercised by local landowners: this change of circumstances itself contributing to the fishermen's weak sense of class conflict.

The difference between their class views as fishermen compared to the account of their class views as rural workers is amply demonstrated by their accounts of political behaviour. The fishermen were largely willing to follow the wishes of their employer and might be classified as deferential voters. As they considered themselves the social equals of their employers, however, they are not so in the usual sense of deferring to class superiors (Newby 1977). Their fathers and relatives in agriculture, by contrast, were forced to show outward deference but exercised their political right against the wishes of their employers, perhaps the only right they could exercise in secrecy. The value of oral evidence in distinguishing between action and meaning is particularly apparent in this section.

Part three looks briefly at the work of women in the fishing community, at domestic life, leisure and belief. These themes are chosen because they integrate with and elaborate earlier points.

Fishermen and miners have been identified as members of extreme occupations, the particular conditions of which, it is alleged, result in a devaluation of domestic life. The evidence here totally refutes this image of the fishermen and the more widely held view (Young and Willmott 1957) that the working-class male before the First World War was a mean and violent husband and a brutal father. The chapter on leisure shows that the level of drinking was modest and that neither the men nor their wives carried the image of fishing as being a tough hard-drinking occupation. Similarly domestic labour was assumed to be a fit and natural task for men and boys. Within the context of wider gender conditioning and occupational opportunity they made a larger than expected contribution to domestic labour. The evidence shows that most marriages were caring partnerships and mutually supportive.

Religion is the final topic and is found both in the chapter on domestic practice and the chapter on belief where it is compared with the practice of superstition. Contrary to the popular historical image (and actuality in many regions) East Anglian fishermen were not religious. The fact that religion is, or can be, practised privately in the home or publicly at an institution means that one can perceive where

observance is being made for reasons of conformity, social control or from commitment to its values.

Actual belief is more difficult to establish with any certainty but it is apparent that the evidence on superstition contrasts sharply with that of religion. It entered into the daily practice of the fishermen in a way which religion did not; even more significantly, it was practised to different degrees in the three different sections of the industry. That it had least hold in the small inshore locations demonstrates that it was not a survivor of 'traditional' practice, and economic anxiety emerges as the clear motive for its greatest prevelance in the most modern section of the industry. This returns attention to the importance of occupation as a source of values and belief.

The final chapter serves as a summary conclusion. It also provides the opportunity for a rather more speculative consideration of the role of domestic and neighbourhood practice in forming basic social attitudes through which industrial life will be experienced; and, indeed, whether this configuration of social practices can usefully be termed 'community'.

I am only too aware that many of the areas of experience covered in this book by one brief chapter are specialised fields which really demand more space than I can give them. Indeed, many could have been the subject of monographs even within the limitations of my own knowledge and research. My reason for including them is that occupational, social and family life is a unified experience; more than that, those experiences are all facets of a unified socio-economic structure which shapes the relationship between those parts. I trust that the weakness of particular sections is compensated for by the advantages of a comprehensive approach. To take a different approach would be to lose one of the major advantages of life histories. They enable us to perceive the real conjuncture of particular phenomena where much other evidence allows only inferences. The relationships which are apparent between different spheres of experience in an open-ended interview *are real and known to coexist because they are simply facets of the one individual experience*, they are not the result of empirico-positivistic inductions nor of specific 'data' collected to inform some preconception or theory. Analysis through grounded-theory from oral evidence has been called 'thick description', by which is meant a strategy of approaching a historical situation neither with preconceived theories nor with the assumption that empirical fact gathering will provide one in favour of 'a strategy of perception that is open-minded and concrete'.[4] In placing weight on life histories I do not want to establish a false distinction between oral and other forms of evidence; the

essence of what follows is an attempt to provide maximum triangulation for the description and interpretation of events. I only hope that my informants might still recognise themselves and their experiences in my analysis of their lives.